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Voz Alta: The Sound of a Collective Memory

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Relational Architecture* 15

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Historical Context: government violence and social unrest

Tlatelolco Massacre, Tlatelolco, Mexico City, October 2, 1968

On October 2, 1968, thousands of protesters representing the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) student resistance movement had gathered in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas to defy the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) regime's statute against public gatherings of three or more people. In attempt to reinforce their actual and symbolic power before the upcoming Olympic games, Mexican police surrounded the Plaza and opened fire, communicating that social unrest would not be tolerated.



In the Wake of the Massacre: officially-imposed informational vacuum

During the aftermath of the massacre, the government blocks all reports on the events of October 2, further reinforcing that power over the non-compliant crowd. Ten days after the massacre, the Mexican government celebrates the signing of the 1968 Olympic Charter, broadcasting to an international audience its "Time of Peace" (Year of Progress).

Memory of the massacre and the PRI's legacy as a force of verticalized silence has infiltrated the Mexican imaginary as evidence of former President Díaz Ordaz and the PRI's unsuccessful attempt to quell this legacy from official history. Because the current regime under President Vicente Fox has refrained from prosecuting Díaz, the ideals of the ruling party and those of the populace remain disjoint.



Enacting the Oppositional Imaginary: artistic, literary, and social activism

Although the PRI regime effectively controlled the information ecosystem through official news networks, this effort was met with an explosion of public resistance through graphic, artistic, and literary means. It is precisely in this artistic, literary, and social activism that the PRI's legacy is challenged.

Lightning strikes were held by the student resistance movement to bring public dialogue into the open. These rallies fostered a collective and collective public body, ideologically and ethically distinct from the PRI's legacy. A public body that is driven and affected by alternative forms of expression. This counter narrative created an oppositional voice that ultimately undermined the hegemony of the PRI's rule.

Voz Alta is a collective act of public performance, artistic, and linguistic oppositional imaginary. The installation act of listening (but not hearing) creates new forms of collective understanding.

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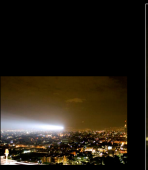
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Experiencing *Voz Alta*

From September 25 to October 5, 2008, three spotlights probe and illuminate the nocturnal landscape from the roof of the Centro Cultural Tlatelolco (CCT) building in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco, Mexico. The spotlights radiate north, southeast, and southwest, pointing to the Basílica de Guadalupe, patron saint of Mexico, Zócalo Square, the sixteenth-century era political and social center of Mexico city, and the Monumento a la Revolución, built in 1910 as dedication to the Mexican Revolution.

In the center of the plaza, a 10kW Xenon robotic searchlight beam to the uppermost floor of the towering CCT building, formerly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Adjacent to the searchlight are a megaphone and a radio transmission device. Upon speaking into the microphone, the participant sonically controls the principal spotlight, creating the input to create a real-time light and sound display. Participants' voices are amplified across the plaza and are simultaneously transmitted through Radio 91.6 UNAM as the light beam for nearly fifteen kilometers from the CCT building. In the absence of live speech, archival recordings are relayed, creating historical narrative into the real-time compilation of oral history. Mixing historic recordings with active participation disrupts the linearity of historical narrative; it brings history into the present, and real-time speech into the dialogue of the Tlatelolco massacre.



Analyzing *Voz Alta*

The horizontal, tangential orientation of *Voz Alta*'s spotlights allude to interrogation, surveillance, and control, echoing the interrogative techniques used by the U.S. along the U.S.-Mexico border. Each extends toward monuments and symbolic spaces, potentially resurrecting participants' memories and each site's historical significance. A symbol of protest, control, and the dissemination of information, the megaphone is emblematic of the student resistance movement that organized the protest on October 2, 1968. It becomes a symbol of democracy, as each person who speaks into it is contributing an equal component of the fragmented history sonically constructed through *Voz Alta*.

Voz Alta is actively created and experienced by the participant, whose speech is instantaneously transmitted into light. This immediacy, coupled with the knowledge that one's voice is illuminating public space and is transmitting through the radio, changes the speaker's investment and relationship with the piece. Whether listening through the radio from a distance or witnessing the lights ebb through the glowing nighttime sky without audio, the audience is aware that voices are visibly striking public space. Therefore, the idea of what occurs through *Voz Alta* alters how people relate to the city, as projected voices become larger than the monuments—they reclaim the space and recreate memory.

When *Voz Alta* concludes, it does not merely fold back into the dominant narratives of architectural space; instead, the reflection prompted through experiencing this piece lingers in one's mind, therefore ideologically persisting through temporal space.



Voz Alta is an act of defiance against government-imposed silence

What is *Relational Architecture*?

Lozano-Hemmer designs *relational architecture* as "anti-monuments for public education." The anti-monument entails technologically "actualizing" buildings with projections, light, and interactive installations. In this process, "shared memory," something that does not belong, is temporally and temporally imposed on existing public space.

The anti-monument is not a tangible object; it is an action, event, and performance.

The act of "disseminating" public monuments breaks the possibility of disrupting established narratives. Viewers are enabled to alter their physical and cognitive relationships with the aesthetic, ideological, and historic meanings of public spaces.

Relational architecture functions as an open proposition that unfolds through time and space. It extends new forms of artistic agency by enabling participants to create new associations with the urban environment through a combination of projections, sonic devices, tracking technology, and searchlights.



Sound, Public Space, and Memory: revising history and restoring voice

By incorporating the memory of a charged national event into spaces imbued with meaning, *Voz Alta* operates on multiple levels, deliberately exceeding the parameters of artistic practice. It is a platform for social dialogue. It is an act of defiance against the government's legacy of silence, completion, and oppressive silence.

As voice-as-light projections superimpose the public voice onto emblems of national heritage, public sites of struggle are recreated as democratic spaces, signifying both the monumentality of the government and the voice of the people. Although *Voz Alta* disrupts a legacy associated with national landmarks, the most profound disruption occurs in the public space itself, as the legacy of the massacre is brought to the surface.

Speakers of the investigation about the violence committed on October 2 restate the urban environment in the context of collective memory. They are voices that have been silenced through government-sanctioned brutality.

Voz Alta precipitates questions about who holds authority to define public space, social history, and individual identity. *Voz Alta* becomes a platform of peace from those who are most qualified to voice the state of the nation: the non-governing populace. It is an attempt to revisit what should have occurred during and after the peaceful protest—a dialogue between the populace and the government.



Concluding Thoughts

Voz Alta is a real-time, immaterial memorial of the tragedy that occurred on October 2, 1968. Sound becomes a medium of understanding and the means to promote new social relations in Mexico, signifying the plurality of voices that are subsumed by the monumentality of architecture and prevailing master narratives of history. By building upon the existing sounds and stories of the city and its inhabitants, *Voz Alta* heightens awareness of the present in relation to the past.

This contemplative, self-evaluation process produces metaphorical noise by raising questions of what really happened on October 2. It prompts the public to critically assess government actions and to question how such accounts exist in collective memory. The tension between what is officially recorded and what is collectively remembered ruptures any given narrative of history by government fiction with the public perception of what occurred on October 2.

Although *Voz Alta* provides participants with an immediate, unmediated platform to voice their recollections, experiences, and thoughts, its efficacy is hindered by the monumentality of the spotlights and the symbolism of the act. Its democratic counterpoint to the voices represented are only those who are comfortable speaking in a public venue. Its limitations, *Voz Alta* releases participants' imaginations.

The limitations of *Voz Alta* expose how memory can only ever be partial. The incomplete nature of memory, further compounded through government-imposed silence and historical distance, signals the best hope for social change is not in rewriting history, but in resisting government-sanctioned manipulations of noise by using new platforms to affect the future.